

IDOT to gauge interest in South Suburban Airport

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The Illinois Department of Transportation will give the long-debated South Suburban Airport one more shot at life when it issues a Request for Information early next week seeking potential partners to develop and operate the proposed airport near Peotone.

"This is the start of a process to determine whether this project is financially feasible and in the best interest of the people of Illinois," Illinois Secretary of Transportation Randall Blankenhorn said Thursday.

He acknowledged residents of the south suburbs have been dealing with uncertainty a long time, and said the state wants to resolve that one way or the other.

"We've put people who live in that region in a bad place for decades," Blankenhorn said. "We need to figure out if this is going to get done."

The transportation secretary, a former executive director of the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, said the RFI will ask respondents a series of questions about the potential demand for the airport, its financial feasibility, and about their background and ability to undertake the project.

Firms will have 30 days to respond, before a meeting in mid-April which would anticipate a Request for Proposals to become the state's private partner in developing and operating the airport.

Blankenhorn said he doesn't know what the private sector's response will be. "That's one of the reasons we're doing this RFI," he said.

Blankenhorn said Gov. Bruce Rauner, who put major transportation projects on hiatus during a budget crisis still to be resolved, wants to determine whether there's interest in a public-private partnership.

"He is committed to finding an answer," Blankenhorn said.

The state has purchased more than 4,000 acres near the Will County village of Peotone. The heart of the property is the small general aviation airport Bult Field, which the state bills as "The Future Site of the South Suburban Airport."

"We have almost all of the inaugural site necessary to build the airport," Blankenhorn said. He said "a handful" of properties would still need to be acquired, but won't be unless the state moves forward with the project.

The controversial airport project has found opposition among many residents of the rural area. Others question whether it would generate the aviation business its proponents suggest, including commercial passenger service.

A South Suburban Airport would also compete with the Gary/Chicago International Airport, which only two years ago completed a \$174 million runway expansion, to be "Chicago's third airport."

Additional information about the project is available online at southsuburbanairport.com.